

Adult Student Emotions That Negatively Affect Learning

Patricia G. Coberly-Holt & Caroline Braun

Armstrong State University

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze the prevalence of indicators in adult students at various levels of study that suggest a student might suffer from imposter syndrome, which occurs when students do not feel that they possess the intelligence or skills to do well in an educational setting, and/or cultural suicide, which consists of students being criticized by friends and/or family for participating in learning. This study sought to determine if certain adult education programs, demographics, or personal factors influenced students' experiences of either of the conditions. Through written surveys with adult students at various levels and programs of study, the study sought to reveal any correlational relationship between any of the variables we reviewed to either impostership or cultural suicide. Therefore, our survey included myriad variables that might be associated with adult learners on an individual basis. Variables included basic demographics such as gender and age, students participating in various programs from English as a Second Language to graduate school, and personal factors such as marital status and accesses to financial aid.

Keywords: Impostership, cultural suicide, adult learners, negative emotions, secondary education

As the gulf in lifetime earnings between high school diploma holders and bachelor's degree holders widens, it becomes even more vital for colleges and universities to make strides to improve student recruitment and retention. In his book *The Skillful Teacher*, Stephen Brookfield identifies two conditions that have an adverse effect upon institutional efforts to recruit and retain students: impostership and cultural suicide. According to Brookfield (2006), impostership is the feeling students experience when they fear that they are not intelligent or qualified enough to meet the demands of higher education. Cultural suicide, on the other hand, is a process that Brookfield

contends students undergo when their families, friends, and communities penalize them for pursuing higher education, an act that they perceive as a betrayal. When students believe that they are imposters or when they fear that their decision to pursue education will result in backlash from their communities, their abilities to participate meaningfully in the process of college are hindered immensely.

Consequently, a consideration of the effects that impostership and cultural suicide have upon students is especially important in light of the increasing diversity on college campuses throughout the country. Historically, college has been the domain of white males of traditional college age; however, the landscape of college has shifted to include students of different races and ethnicities, veterans, and students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, women are pursuing higher education in increasing numbers, and many adults who are beyond traditional college age are returning to school or pursuing higher education for the first time. By considering the effects that cultural suicide and impostership may have upon a diverse nontraditional student population, higher educational institutions will be better equipped to provide services that may increase student recruitment and retention. The purpose of this study is to determine if there are variables associated with higher education students that may help predict certain students more at risk for either impostership and/or cultural suicide.

Literature Review

Impostership, also known as the imposter syndrome, plagues students across all races, genders, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds. McDowell, Grubb, and Geho (2015) identify six characteristics, or symptoms, of the imposter syndrome that Brookfield discusses. These include: 1.) Feeling like an intellectual fraud, 2.) Believing that luck rather than ability explains personal successes, 3.) Believing that past accomplishments cannot be achieved again, 4.) Fearful of criticism and evaluation from others, 5.) Feeling unable to enjoy past achievements, and 6.) Fearful that others will realize their incompetence. As stated by Zinko, Ferris, Blass and Laird (2007), an

individual's perception, either of self or the organization, becomes the reality that these individuals live with. Regardless of the accuracy of these perceptions, they lead to both positive and negative outcomes (Suls & Wills, 1991). When these six symptoms are considered within the context of the college classroom, the damage they can inflict upon learners' academic performance and self-esteem can be devastating.

Adults at all levels of education are susceptible to the damage that the imposter syndrome can wreak upon their identities as students. According to Brookfield (2006) neither remedial learners nor doctoral students are spared. He theorizes that those who experience the imposter syndrome throughout their educational careers have a tendency to create an image of the ideal student as one who is all-knowing, who is already an expert. When these students realize the distance that lies between their current state and that of their idealized version of the student role, they become disillusioned and begin to doubt their abilities (Brookfield, 2006).

As such, if the feelings of impostership are not addressed, Brookfield argues that they can damage students' ability to engage in the critical thought processes vital to the students' success in school. He contends that if students feel like imposters, they will hesitate to perform critical analysis of profound thinkers and works within their field. This will limit their development as learners and critical thinkers. Because of the emphasis that higher education places upon critical modes of thinking, it is vital that authorities make efforts to identify and address students' feelings of impostership. Such efforts will create an environment in which students can engage in the types of thinking that will make them successful in both college and their careers.

In addition to feelings of impostership, some students must also contend with feelings of cultural suicide. Cultural suicide involves a conflict between students' home cultures and the culture that they encounter at school. One aspect of college culture that often clashes with the home culture is the emphasis that higher education places upon critical thinking (Brookfield, 2006). When students begin to engage in critical thinking, they may begin to

question aspects of their home culture that they may have previously accepted without question. They may begin to reconsider traditional roles and religious beliefs in light of new experiences, and this can cause them to become isolated from family and peers. Loved ones often react to students by accusing them of “putting on airs” or of becoming too subversive (Brookfield, 2015). Numerous demographics of learners find themselves exposed to this phenomenon.

Therefore, Brookfield (2006) identifies several groups that are particularly vulnerable to the experience of cultural suicide. These include minority students, working class students, first generation students, and nontraditional aged adult learners. College campuses have traditionally served mostly white, middle class students of traditional college age; however, the demographics of many campuses have transformed dramatically. First generation students are enrolling in universities in increasing numbers, and, due to the demographic composition of this group, these students are particularly at risk of experiencing feelings of cultural suicide. According to Jehangir (2010), first generation students “are more likely than their more advantaged peers to be students of color, older than 24 years, female, nonnative speakers of English, and born outside of the United States” (p. 14).

One particular issue that may place minority students at increased risk of cultural suicide is the notion of “selling out.” Some scholars, such as Kennedy (2008) argue that minority students, particularly black students, may be accused of “selling out” if they choose to pursue higher education. While the notion of selling out is a controversial one, Randall asserts that many African Americans who become successful in multiracial environments, such as the university, will eventually be accused of “selling out.” Randall suggests that the values of African American students’ communities may initially appear to be at odds with the values that are promoted within higher education. As a result, he concludes that when African American students begin to show signs of adopting these new values, they are seen as rejecting aspects of their original culture. Similarly, Jehangir (2010) agrees that the conflict between the student’s home cultures and the culture of higher education can be difficult to navigate. She suggests that first

generation students often receive the unspoken message from their families that they should “go out and learn things, be smart, but not too smart” (p. 23). She adds that the changes that first generation college students undergo throughout the education process can make family members and friends feel as if they are losing the student.

Method

Participants

Grounded on our goal of analyzing the prevalence of impostership and cultural suicide in adult students, we wanted to sample a diverse array of adult students. Since we were searching for students experiencing one or both of the conditions, we sampled adults currently enrolled in a structured adult education setting. We desired to sample several levels of students, so the survey was disseminated to undergraduate students at the sophomore level as well as graduate level students working towards a master of education degree at a small culturally diverse state university situated on the Atlantic coast. The survey was also provided to adult students including adults enrolled in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program and General Education Degree (GED) preparation classes at an urban coastal technical college in the same county.

Materials

A written survey was designed by the second author which included Likert-style response inquiries, yes/no closed answer questions, and short answer inquiries to determine if a correlation existed for various variables and the incidence of Imposter Syndrome and/or Cultural Suicide. The survey was created based primarily on what was learned through a review of the literature on the topics being studied.

We developed and piloted a short survey consisting of thirty-six items focused on demographic data, program data, living situation, and questions which we thought would provide us with evidence of either Imposter Syndrome and/or Cultural Suicide. These survey questions included inquiries

such as military background, significant other's level of education, family income as a child, and if the learner was a first generation college student. Two opened-ended questions were included that provided opportunities for respondents to describe experiences to scenarios that are commonly descriptive of an individual experiencing impostership or cultural suicide. The final survey was disseminated through SurveyMonkey, an online software survey site.

Design

The initial design plan of this study was to be a mixed-methods research framework (Creswell & Clark, 2007). As Creswell and Clark (2007) wrote, by mixing quantitative and qualitative data sets, the researcher provides a better understanding than if either dataset had been used alone.

Due to the small number of participants who chose to provide contact information, follow-up interviews were not completed. Therefore, the study was conducted as a descriptive quantitative research design.

Procedure

The instructors of three sophomore level undergraduate courses and three master's level courses added a link to the survey website on the institutional learning management system and provided these students with an orange slip of paper with the website address of the survey, gave a brief rationale of the study and requested they complete the survey. All students were assured that neither taking nor choosing not to take the survey would affect their course grade. Several verbal reminders were provided during classes. In addition, the survey link was sent via email to the Dean of Adult Education at the technical college. Students in the ESL and GED classes were asked to take the survey if they were comfortable doing so.

Between mid-December and early March, fifty-one students, 43 females and 8 males completed the online survey in the three months it remained active. Of this number, 5 (9.8%) were in ESL classes, 4 (7.8%) were in GED preparation classes, 18 (35.3%) were sophomore level undergraduate

students, 13 (25.5%) were master degree students, and 11 (21.6%) did not report a level of study. Participants were of diverse races, including 2 (3.9%) Asian, 18 (35.3%) black, 8 (15.7%) Hispanic, 1 (2.0%) Native American, 21 (41.2%) white, and 1 (2.0%) other.

Data Analysis

Responses to each of the thirty-six individual questions on the survey were initially summarized using descriptive statistics by the SurveyMonkey software that was utilized to gather respondent data. Based solely on the individual participant replies to the Likert-style questions, it appeared that more students suffered from feelings of impostership than from cultural suicide, with almost half (47.06%) noting fear that people would find out that they are not as intelligent as they think that they are. Seventeen additional students indicated on the short answer questions that they do not feel intelligent enough to succeed in college either presently or in the past, a strong symptom of impostership. Nine respondents provided responses on the short answer questions that revealed that at least some of their friends and/or family were unsupportive or had been unsupportive at the some point, an indicator of cultural suicide. At this point, we began to review for correlations between the various variables and impostership or cultural suicide. This was accomplished by exporting the data from SurveyMonkey into IBM SPSS Statistics 24. We ran a variety of nonparametric tests, including chi-square, t-tests, and paired sample correlations with multiple variables.

Findings

We found that the multiple choice, Likert scale, and closed questions which requested demographic data, program data, living situation, and questions which we felt would provide us with evidence of either Imposter Syndrome and/or Cultural Diversity did not communicate effectively if either condition existed. For example, participants tended to strongly agree with the statement that they felt confident in their ability to do well when they took a class. However, by means of the two open-ended questions, participants began providing multiple examples of how and when they experienced one or

both of the situations. When asked, “If you have ever felt that you were not intelligent enough or qualified enough to attend school, please share those experiences,” respondents shared experiences that were by definition analogues to impostership.

Overall, thirty-seven (72.5%) of respondents suggested they often felt symptoms of impostership. However, no statistical significance was noted that suggested a correlation to participant demographics, level of program, marital status, or any of the other variables that were observed.

Of the participants from all programs, ten (19.6%) indicated that they experienced the phenomenon of cultural suicide. Again, no statistical significance was detected based on age, race, gender, income, prior military service, or any other observed variable. Of the fifty-one participants from all of the programs surveyed, nine (18%) responded that they experienced indicators of both impostership and cultural suicide. As with those experiencing only one of the situations, they came from various programs, ages, races, and income levels, with no statistical significance observed with any of the variables.

Discussion

Brookfield (2014) states that impostership plagues students across all races, classes, ages, genders, and levels of education. The responses from participants indicated that this was true of those who participated in this study. The same was true in regards to cultural suicide. We found no correlations with our respondents with respect to level of education, gender, race, income, marital status, age, or any of the other twenty-five variables we observed. With such a high proportion of adults experiencing one or both of these adverse conditions in the classroom, and without a way to determine which adult students are more likely to suffer, we must be prepared to help students deal with negative emotions associated with formal education at all levels of education and personal demographics that walk through the classroom door.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that although more students participating in structured adult educational classrooms experienced impostership, there are no definite markers for identifying adult students experiencing impostership or cultural suicide. These results do indicate that as noted by Brookfield (2006) and McDowell, Grubb, and Geho (2015), students from all walks of life are plagued by impostership at relatively high rates. Brookfield (2006) identified several groups of students who were more susceptible to cultural suicide, including minority students, working class students, first generation students, and nontraditional students. The data from this study did not support this statement, as adults from across variables were found to experience the effects of cultural suicide. The authors of this paper believe that both of these conditions have an effect on recruitment and retention of adult students across the country. Realizing that high numbers of students are facing adverse emotions associated with learning suggests that staff, faculty, and administrators need to prepare and be proactive in their approaches to guiding students to circumvent the adverse emotions that are often associated with transitioning various levels of higher education.

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